



INVENTING THE MIDDLE EAST

Britain and the Persian Gulf in the Age of Global Imperialism

Guillemette Crouzet

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P r e f a c e

This book was born out of a sense that an important dimension was missing in existing accounts of the genesis of the “Middle East.” Whole library shelves of scholarly literature have been dedicated to describing how Western powers drew lines in the sand in the wake of the First World War and thereby recast the political borders of the region. This conjuncture saw the disaggregation of the territories of the old Ottoman Empire and their reformulation into a new and complex territorial mosaic conceived largely around the geopolitics of oil. It is usually assumed that the concept of the Middle East, with all the territorial and strategic upheavals it promoted, was launched from this early twentieth-century juncture. In the pages that follow, I seek to tell instead the history of *another* Middle East, one at a significant remove – not only chronologically but also geographically – from this conventionally ascribed starting point. For while “Middle East” has long been an ubiquitous term in world affairs, its own antecedents and early invocations have remained curiously underexplored. When in fact was this label first imagined, and why? What geographical spaces did it first denote? And what entanglements of actors, conflicts, and processes underpinned these shifts, which made the coining of that geographical term both meaningful and necessary?

By pursuing such questions, this book offers a new account of the Middle East’s invention. The answers it proposes explore how the idea of the “Middle East” emerged not from the First World War and its aftermath but rather from much earlier conflicts centred on the nineteenth-century Persian Gulf. Even before the oil boom of the twentieth century, the Gulf region had taken on strategic importance for competing global empires, and the fundamental dynamic in this

was how the Gulf came to form a terraqueous crossroads and borderland guarding British India's western flank. The origins of the term "Middle East" can be traced precisely to Britain's long hegemony over the Indian subcontinent and to its violent overspill into the Gulf and its hinterlands.

This pattern of British encroachment into the Persian Gulf region began by degrees under the expansionist East India Company in the later eighteenth century. It would be catalyzed by the geostrategic shock generated by Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798; in the decades after that, it would be further ratcheted up by gunboat attacks conducted under British auspices in the name of pacifying Arab "pirates." Throughout the 1800s, this crucial geopolitical arena was then secured and transformed to become the bulwark of an informal imperial system erected around British India. The creation of this sphere of influence was piecemeal and multifaceted, involving a triangle of actors in London, on the Indian subcontinent, and in the Gulf region itself. Cartographical expeditions imposed a geographical logic on this "British" Gulf, whose political economy – geared toward the globalizing trade in pearls, date palms, and slaves – was reordered to favour imperial priorities. Officials and speculators sought new passages to India running through Mesopotamia, archaeologists unearthed artifacts of the region's ancient empires, and ideologues envisaged the rebirth of this cradle of civilizations under British oversight. By the end of the nineteenth century, amid renewed waves of inter-imperial competition, this nexus of British interests and narratives in the Gulf region would occasion the appearance of a new appellation, the "Middle East."

Around this same period, apologists for empire would propagate celebratory retrospective narratives of this century-long unfolding of British interventionism and overlordship in the Persian Gulf and its environs with a view to justifying its transformation into a kind of British "lake," while also seeking to sustain the wider region's open-ended continuation under imperial tutelage. Such accounts often fêted Britain's history of informal empire in the region as one characterized by fair and benevolent custodianship. Yet the realities of how the British – and, more particularly, the emergent semiautonomous imperial administration of British India – had projected themselves into this contested Gulf region emerge in this book in a markedly different

light. A critical interrogation of the historical record – notwithstanding that the available archives and other sources are largely of British official origin – strongly suggests that the policies of intervention in the region only belatedly resembled a grand design, and at no point a disinterested one. Indeed, in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there had been significant seesawing and sclerosis among British officials regarding what the most efficacious policy to adopt in the region might be. Even when an informal imperial agenda did begin to take shape, its enactment remained fraught, and included periods of conflict involving considerable violence and some notable military setbacks at the hands of local actors in the Gulf. Nevertheless, these decades of British “imperial meridian” in the region would gradually coalesce into a distinct pattern of indirect rule.¹ As accretively elaborated and systematized from the mid-nineteenth century on, this ensured regional security and pacification – conditions of immense knock-on benefit to British India – with relatively low running costs. The early globalization of the Gulf economy, with the local shaykhs and other rulers instrumentalized as brokers under British auspices, would prove to be of central importance in these developments.

British influence in the region that would thenceforth be dubbed the Middle East ebbed in the final decades of the nineteenth century. New interloper powers, Germany the most prominent among them, sought to insert themselves into the strategic crucible of the Gulf, threatening to weaken Britain’s position there. In the event, however, the informal empire the British had constructed in the Gulf’s waters and sands would be supplanted and transformed in quite rapid and unexpected ways during the fallout from the First World War as the Middle East came to be “reinvented” around oil. In the ensuing years, a new kind of British colonial regime administered from London across a swathe of former Ottoman territories quickly overshadowed what had come before. Given this peak of British direct rule across a very different iteration of the Middle East down to the middle of the twentieth century, it has become all the more difficult to comprehend that there had in fact been a much longer history of British imperial entanglement and interventionism in the Gulf region dating back to the age of Napoleon.

Finally, the origins of this book require a few words of explanation. Its first iteration was as a French-language book, published in 2015

by the French academic publisher Champ Vallon.² This new English-language version was made possible by a substantial grant from the Centre National du Livre in France. This work represents not just a translation and a slimming down of the original French text, but also a significant updating and revision. Over the several years since the publication of the French version of this book, the scholarship around different aspects of the intertwined histories of Britain, the Indian subcontinent, and inter-imperial competition in the Gulf region has blossomed significantly. Taking stock of this wave of important new work has been an additional element of preparing this new English version.³ In a host of other ways, too, this book has been changed by the author's own transplantation from a francophone to an anglophone context, with a change of academic home from France to Britain. My many debts in this respect are described more fully in this book's Acknowledgments.

Acknowledgments

This book is an extensively revised version of a book published in French in 2015, *Genèses du Moyen-Orient. Le Golfe Persique à l'âge des impérialismes (vers 1800–vers 1914)*. It was a privilege to work on that first book manuscript with Patrick Beaune and Joël Cornette at Champ Vallon. Richard Baggaley at McGill-Queen's University Press then made possible the transformation of this work from its original French form into the present English-language version. He was the ideal editor, and I cannot thank him enough for his boundlessly generous and tireless work on this book. I also would like to thank Kathleen Fraser and Carol Bonnett at McGill-Queen's University Press for their assistance with the manuscript at a later stage. The translation of the French manuscript into English was itself enabled by a grant from the Centre National du Livre and from several further sources in both France and the United Kingdom. These included the Laboratoire d'excellence "Ecrire une histoire nouvelle de l'Europe"; the Fond d'intervention pour la recherche of Lettres Sorbonne Université; and, at Warwick University, the Global History and Culture Centre, the Early Modern and Eighteenth Century Centre, the Humanities Research Fund, and the Institute of Advanced Study. The initial French manuscript was translated by Juliet Sutcliffe, whom I wish to thank. The long process of revising and copy editing the text was then assisted by the late Meredith Sherlock, whom I wish could have seen the final result, and by Kelly Bimbry Midura. Deborah Schwartz then reviewed the entire manuscript and further assisted me with the transliterations of Arabic and Persian words. Thanks also to Matthew Kudelka for rescuing me from innumerable errors and to Tere Mullins for her help with the index.

This text began its life as a doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne launched in 2008. I thank my supervisor, Eric Bussière, and the members of the examining committee. My research greatly benefited from spending two years as a visiting doctoral student in Britain. The first of these years was spent at King's College London, with the mentorship of David Todd, to whom I am most grateful. The second was at the University of Cambridge, where I was welcomed by Chris Bayly, who went on to become an external examiner for my thesis and would ultimately write the foreword to the French version of this book. His enthusiastic support for my research was boundless, and the largest of my intellectual debts is to him. He passed away before I completed this book, and I hope he would have been pleased that I followed the encouragement he gave me to publish a version of my work in English.

This book is not merely a translation but an updated version of its French-language iteration. Over the past several years, I have been fortunate to spend time at a series of institutions that have allowed my work to develop in new directions. At the European University Institute in Florence, where I was lucky enough to have an office “with a view” for a year, I am indebted to Youssef Cassis, Laura Lee Downs, Ann Thomson, and Stéphane Van Damme. From my subsequent time as a fellow at the Graduate Institute in Geneva, I thank Gopalan Balachandran and Davide Rodogno. Above all, however, this book is the product of my time at Warwick University, where I have been exceptionally lucky to be based as a postdoctoral fellow in the History Department. My greatest debt at Warwick is to the wonderful Maxine Berg, without whom this book would not have been possible. I have also accrued many further debts, above all to Anne Gerritsen and Rebecca Earle. Exchanges with members of the Global History and Culture Centre and the Early Modern and Eighteenth Century Centre have shaped this book in a multitude of ways, and I have been fortunate to be part of a thriving community of fellow postdocs and researchers. Particular thanks for all manner of help and support go to Dan Branch, Giorgio Riello, Robert Fletcher, Penny Roberts, Charles Walton, Mark Philp, Mark Knights, and Guido van Meersbergen. My time at Warwick would not have been as pleasant had it not been for the support of some of the administrators of the History Department

and the Faculty of Arts, especially Claudia Gray, Amy Evans, Robert Horton, David Duncan, Liese Perrin, and Jean Noonan.

As this project developed, it benefited from opportunities to present and discuss my work at numerous conferences, seminars, and other forums, and from the help and encouragement of many scholars and friends. I wish particularly to thank Sunil Amrith, Maureen Attali, On Barak, Fabrice Bensimon, Francisco Bethencourt, Noëlline Castagnez, Philippe Chassaigne, Nandini Chatterjee, William Gervase Clarence-Smith, Olivier Dard, Jean-Pierre Dormois, Jean-François Dunyach, Margot Finn, Mark Greengrass, Simon Jackson, Colin Jones, Lawrence Klein, Marie-Clarté Lagrée, Simon Layton, Vincent Lemire, Michel Leymarie, Josephine McDonagh, Jacob Norris, James Onley, Pierre Purseigle, John Slight, Elizabeth Elbourne, Jon Parry, Laila Parsons, Yann Rodier, Eugene Rogan, Radhika Singha, Sujit Sivansundaram, Herman van Der Vee, and Myriam Yacoubi. Special thanks go to Laurie Macdonald. I am also grateful for the assistance of the staff of numerous libraries, archives, and research centres, notably the India Office Records at the British Library and Warwick University Library.

I grew up in a family obsessed with history. My two grandmothers, Françoise Crouzet and Paulette Pavan, shared their memories of the Second World War in France, one as a Jew subject to persecution and forced into hiding, and the other as a young woman who, together with her parents, joined a Resistance network that helped shelter downed American and British airmen. My grandfather François Crouzet was a virtuoso historian, and hearing recollections of a career in which he had met Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel, and many other giants of the historian's craft helped me develop my own taste for history. My parents, Denis and Elisabeth Crouzet, have done for me more than I can express in words. They are models for me, as parents and as historians.

When I met Simon, *Genèses* had just been published. He has been with me at every step of the process of preparing this English-language version of the book and has read every word I wrote. He has been my biggest support. I could not have done all this without him and his endless love and patience. Our daughter Alice arrived while I was completing this book. I hope that one day she reads it and, instead of finding it too dull, perceives between its lines some of the joy I felt

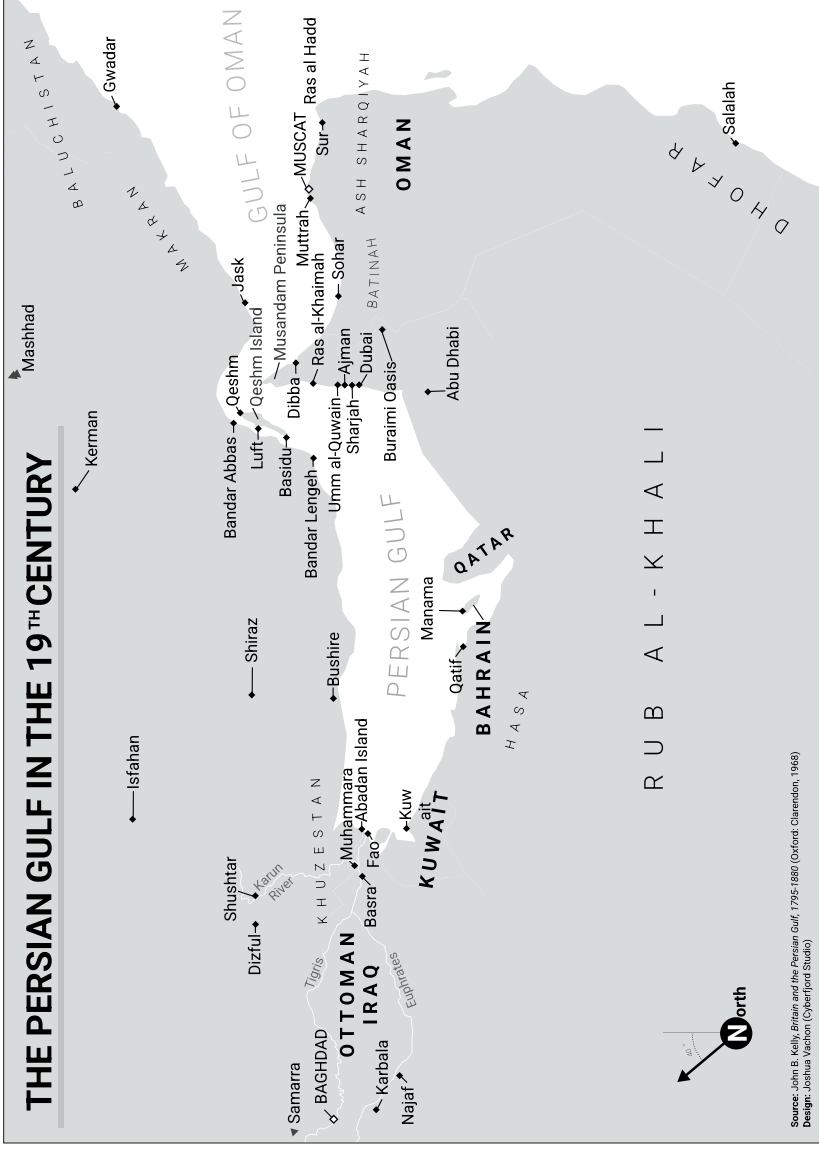
while writing it and imagining her imminent arrival in our lives. This book is for her and for Simon.

Note on Transliteration

Arabic and Persian words and names have been transliterated into English according to a simplified system based on that used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. To facilitate reading for the non-specialist, all diacritical marks have been omitted, with a few exceptions (Shatt al-‘Arab, Fath‘Ali Shah). For Arabic and Persian names and words that have a common transliteration in English (Muhammad, Mecca), this spelling has been used. According to the *IJMES* transliteration system, British capitalization rules have been applied to transliterated Arabic titles and the article *al-* is not capitalized unless it begins a sentence or endnote.

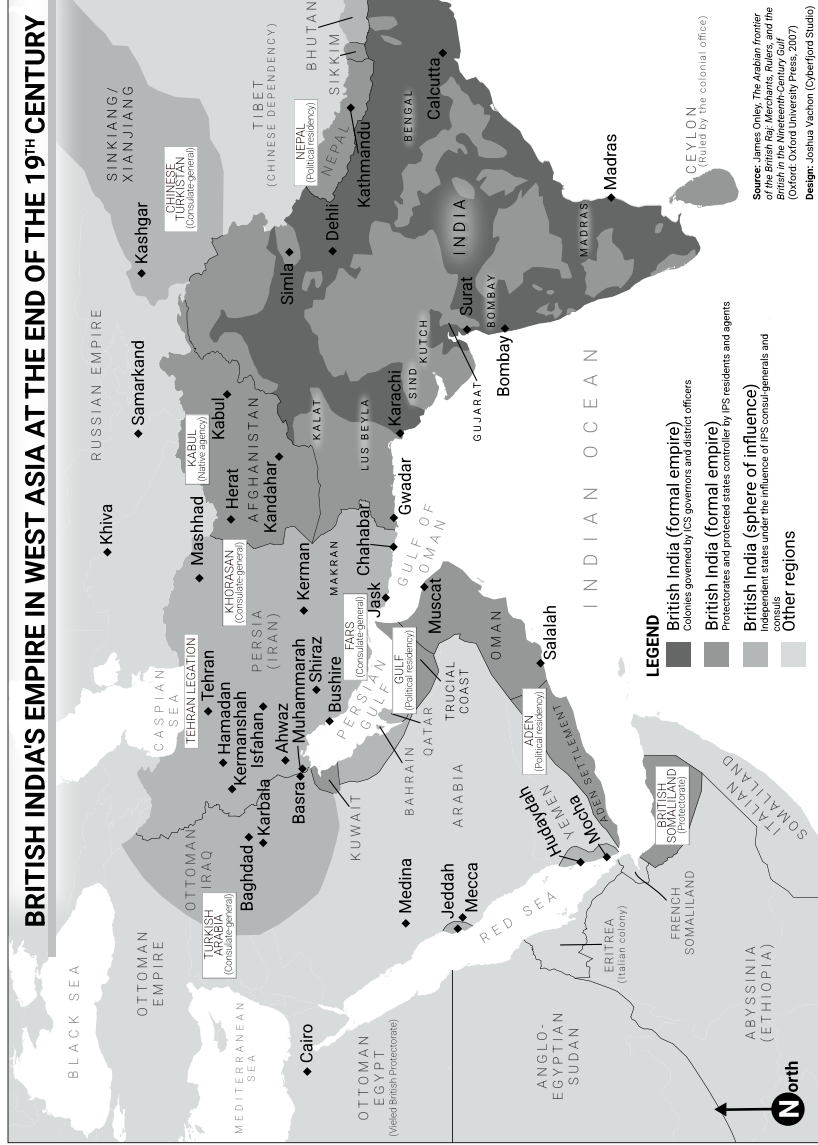
All translations from French are my own, unless otherwise noted.

THE PERSIAN GULF IN THE 19TH CENTURY



Source: John B. Kelly, *Britain and the Persian Gulf, 1795-1880* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948)
Design: Joshua Vichon (Cyanford Studio)

BRITISH INDIA'S EMPIRE IN WEST ASIA AT THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY



Inventing the Middle East

Intr oductio n

In November 1903, George Nathaniel Curzon, the Viceroy of India, set sail from Bombay for the Persian Gulf to begin a carefully choreographed official tour of the region. Accompanied by an impressive naval flotilla, Curzon – who as viceroy was Britain’s chief administrator of India and the sovereign’s representative – his wife, and their entourage travelled on the *Argonaut*, which was accompanied by four other ships with more than one thousand men on board. As Lucien Laronce, the French vice-consul in Oman, noted, such a deployment of force in the Gulf waters had not been seen since a fleet of vessels belonging to the British Royal Navy and to the East India Company – the trading company turned territorial power that had spearheaded the British presence in India since 1600 – had sailed from Bombay to attack the “pirate” city of Ras al-Khaimah on the Strait of Hormuz in 1809. Curzon’s descent on the Gulf in 1903, by contrast, was framed not as a military intervention but rather as a kind of triumphal marker of the imperial role that the British had constructed for themselves in the Gulf over the intervening century. Indeed, the tour was elaborately structured so as to commemorate but also to consolidate the seamless map of alliances Britain had forged with local powers in a process dating back to 1798, when a treaty had been signed with the Sultanate of Oman – the first of many accords reached with regional potentates on both sides of the Gulf. Over the same period, the British regime in India had itself changed markedly, the East India Company proxy government having been replaced by the Government of India in 1858 and British direct and indirect imperial rule having been extended over ever greater swathes of the subcontinent. Curzon’s three-week tour through the Gulf involved the staging of ceremonialized encounters

with all the major rulers of the Arabian side of the Gulf, coupled with a more abbreviated program of visits and meetings in Persia. The tour as a whole redeployed an array of pomp-and-circumstance techniques of diplomacy and indirect rule whose efficacy had already been proven in the context of British India itself.

In geopolitical terms, the viceroy's 1903 tour of the Gulf may be said to have been symbolic of a fundamental strategic fact: in parallel with the development of the British Empire in India, the Gulf and its hinterlands was perceived to be a vital arena of imperial defence and had been treated as such. In speeches he gave during the tour, Curzon set out a historical grand narrative lionizing Britain's imperial mission – one that he asserted to be a mission accomplished – of securing peace and prosperity in the Gulf region. At the same time, however, his very presence in the area highlighted the fact that the ultimate purpose served by this long-term program of British interventions in the region had been a highly pragmatic one of safeguarding the western flank of British India. The importance to British India of the frontier zone of sea and sand composed by the Gulf and its hinterlands was, indeed, such that a corresponding new spatial concept had evolved over the course of the nineteenth century to describe the region. For much of that century, this was a concept without a definitive label. At precisely the same period in which Curzon's tour was being planned and undertaken, however, a retrospective name for it was found, and it began to achieve a degree of critical mass: the "Middle East." This book is a history of the entangled relationships between Britain, the Indian subcontinent, and the Gulf, which culminated in that new moniker – one coined with reference to geopolitical circumstances set in place over the nineteenth century, but which would go on to have a much-transformed afterlife, down to the present day.

The Middle East: "A term which I have not seen"

Curzon does not appear to have used the term "Middle East" – neither during his 1903 tour of the Gulf nor in his correspondence about it – when referring to the land and sea territories to the west of India. But the term was rapidly gaining currency at precisely this juncture. In 1902, one year before the viceroy's squadron dropped anchor at Muscat

on the first stage of the viceregal tour, the influential British journalist Valentine Chirol published twenty essays in *The Times* dedicated to “The Middle Eastern Question.” These were subsequently republished as a book titled *The Middle Eastern Question; or, Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* (1903), whose main subject was, to quote the author, “the Indian frontier.”¹ According to Chirol, the Middle East consisted of “those regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India, and which are consequently bound up with the problems of Indian political as well as military defence.”² From Egypt and the Red Sea to Afghanistan, India was protected by an immense frontier composed of land and sea territories that were centred around the Gulf. This was the Middle East.

Chirol was an influential publicist, and his intervention gave the term “Middle East” a great boost. But he was not in fact the first commentator to have come up with this concept. In 1900, Thomas Gordon, a former British Army officer, had written an article on the “Middle East” region, where, according to him, the concerns of the “external policy” of the British Empire in India were especially “sensitive.”³ Gordon, who had spent most of his military career on the subcontinent, did not claim ownership of the term “Middle East.”⁴ In fact, he pointed out that the term had been in use for several years in administrative circles in British India, as well as in Persia at the British legation in Tehran (where Gordon had been an attaché).⁵ Despite these early instances, however, the launching of the term “Middle East” is often credited to the American admiral Alfred T. Mahan, with the publication of his article titled “The Persian Gulf and International Relations” in the *National Review*, a London periodical, in September 1902.⁶ There, Mahan defined the Middle East – which he described as his original coinage, “a term which I have not seen” – as a zone with fluid borders situated between South and West Asia and centred around the Gulf. More specifically, he described a space where Britain’s domination of the strategic land and sea communication routes between London and India was increasingly being threatened by the encroachments of imperial rivals, especially Russia and Germany.⁷ In 1908 the first cartographical projection of this Middle East evoked by Gordon, Chirol, and Mahan was printed. This map, titled “Map of Arabia and the Persian Gulf,” did not use the term “Middle East,” yet it represented

what were in effect its imagined territories, extending from Egypt to Afghanistan and encompassing the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, and the Sea of Oman.⁸

The definitions of the Middle East posited by Chirol, Mahan, and Gordon were not precisely the same. Indeed, it might appear that at the beginning of the twentieth century imaginary geographies were beginning to appear, not just of a single Middle East, but of multiple possible Middle Easts. From the very first uses of the term, there was a significant lack of consistency over the exact location of this space. Where *was* the Middle East, if not by default east of Europe and west of India?

For Gordon and Chirol, the existence of the Middle East was determined by that of the British Empire in India, while for Mahan it was instead a terraqueous zone of confrontation where British supremacy at sea – the foundation of its global power – was encountering imperial challenges from Russia and Germany. To some extent, what is most salient is the overlap in these positions: in particular, a unifying characteristic of the Middle East concept as envisaged by Chirol, Mahan, and Gordon was its definition by geopolitics rather than by any particular cultural or religious identity, or indeed by reference to the Bible or to ancient history. It is also worth emphasizing that in the accounts of these three authors, the term was not developed primarily in relation to the Ottoman Empire or the “Eastern Question” (a long-standing European debate about the Ottoman Empire’s decline and potential dismemberment), but with reference to the British Empire.⁹

From all this we can see that the early twentieth century constituted a turning point at which various observers felt the need to name or define a space that was still geographically fluid yet understood to be of key strategic importance and which thus began to be cautiously referred to as the Middle East. From that point onward the world map no longer seemed to make sense without this intermediary space.

Why did this macroregion begin to take form on maps and begin to be written about by journalists, geographers, and imperial administrators just at the beginning of the twentieth century? Why was the existence of the Middle East, for Chirol and Gordon, linked to that of the British colonies in the Indian subcontinent?

Seeking to answer these questions, this book proposes to study the invention of one Middle East, namely the British Middle East, the one

that first occasioned the term's appearance in English. In this study readers will find the genesis of this metageographical concept not in the West in the twentieth century, but rather in the relationship between India and an inland sea that was part of the Indian Ocean – the Persian Gulf – during the nineteenth century.¹⁰ This Middle East is not the space that was created in the aftermath of the First World War, comprising a mosaic of territories with different administrative statuses and rooted in the deserts of Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq. In these pages there is nothing on the Sykes-Picot Agreement signed by France and Britain in 1916, on the system of mandates whose borders were drawn in the aftermath of the war, or on the oil wells that were so coveted by Western powers. *Inventing the Middle East* instead tells the history of a Middle East focused on a maritime world, the Gulf, which the British imagined in the nineteenth century as a fulcrum of their empire and as a bridge between Europe and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and India and the wider Indian Ocean world on the other. Around this space and its hinterlands the British developed a complex tapestry of interventionist practices and imperial fantasies. In these dynamics the region was envisioned as the site of a transformation, to be overseen by Britain, that would both target the supposedly endemic lawlessness and unproductivity of its seas and deserts and foster a kind of renewal that might somehow reconnect this space with its own lost glory as a site of great ancient empires, thus bringing back to life something of the lost grandeur of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

In other words, in seeking to interpret this *new* conception – of the “Middle East” as first envisaged around 1900 – this book explores a set of *past* practices for which the term furnished a label. It may thus be considered a term that – to draw on the theoretical language proposed by the historian Reinhart Koselleck – provided a solution to a set of needs, or organized an area of uncertainty. In this sense its conception offers an example of “a historical concept oriented to the future.” It was certainly a concept that offered itself up to multiple reuses and refurbishments against changing contexts, as illustrated by its subsequent and enduring history down to the present.¹¹ Conversely, it also contained an inheritance from the past, for “Middle East,” as launched in the years around 1900, referred to a set of already long-standing circumstances – a triangle of entanglements between Britain, the Gulf, and the British Empire in India.

Indeed, to borrow again from Koselleck's analytical framework, "Middle East" might itself be used retrospectively in consciously teleological ways, offering as it does a later concept extended "to cover earlier periods" so as to establish "a minimum of common ground" for analysis.¹² Indeed, for the nineteenth century at least, such uses of "Middle East" may be teleological only in a strict sense, for the term did not emerge out of nowhere; rather, there was in fact a series of predecessor terms (such as "East," "Orient," and "Near East") that extensively – although only ever partially – conceptually prefigured it. To put the case more cautiously, "Middle East" may be said to be interestingly poised between two levels of thinking historiographically about the past: first, that which "investigates circumstances already articulated at an earlier period in language" (albeit here not yet in the precise formulation "Middle East"), and second, that which "reconstructs circumstances which were not articulated into language earlier but which can be worked up with the help of specific methods and indices."¹³

A guiding principle of the present book is that when the term "Middle East" is taken to be a starting point for an analysis geared around the post-1900 period, something important is lost from view – namely the nineteenth-century history of which the term was a kind of culmination. The reconstitution of that history so as to link together Britain, India, and the Gulf is the primary purpose of this account. Accordingly, it presents a multifaceted exploration. The remainder of this introduction briefly evokes three main elements that underpin the following chapters. First, a survey is made of the ways the space now known as the Middle East was considered discursively in imperial imaginaries before the term "Middle East" was coined. Second, discussion is given to the question of the structure of the British Empire in India and its significant autonomy in relation to the government in London. Last, attention turns to the spaces of the Gulf and the globally connected maritime and terrestrial crossroads it formed.

East, Orient, Near East, Nearer East: The Impossible Middle East

The decades after 1900 saw the enactment, in Britain and other imperial regions, of an aspiration on the part of geographers, administrators, and publicists to divide the world into vast macroregions that would

transcend political, cultural, geophysical, and social borders.¹⁴ Mahan and Chirol appear to have been part of this dynamic. Other examples from around the same time include the concepts of “pivot area” and “heartland of Euro-Asia,” invented in 1904 by the British geographer Halford Mackinder; “Central Europe,” invented by Friedrich Naumann in 1915; and Ewald Banse’s attempt to fix a specific definition of “the Orient” in 1908.¹⁵

Such designations were neither preordained nor uncontested: “Middle East” was in fact a late arrival in the search for terminology to describe the space stretching from the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea to the Indian Ocean and the subcontinent. Despite the cluster of invocations of “Middle East” around 1900, the term in fact struggled to gain traction in Britain during the early twentieth century. More favour was accorded to the term “Near East,” which had been much in fashion since the mid-nineteenth century and was still being used by Curzon on the eve of the First World War.¹⁶ Even Chirol had long preferred Near East to Middle East, notably in his book *The Far Eastern Question*, published seven years before *The Middle Eastern Question*.¹⁷ In Britain around 1900, alongside “Near East,” the looser terms “Orient” and “East” were also used, rather than “Middle East.”¹⁸

What were the outer limits of this “East,” or this “Orient,” notions that were endlessly evoked in Victorian and Edwardian Britain? Where were they located? For some British travellers, writers, and diplomats, the East and the Orient included Syria, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and Palestine. For others who favoured a more maximalist definition, these terms might also encompass the territories of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and Asia Minor, as well as Persia, Russia, and other yet more distant horizons. Among the Victorian and Edwardian elite, this fluctuating geography of the Orient and the East was strongly influenced by ancient history, both as recounted by classical authors and as reinterpreted in more recent canonical British works such as Edward Gibbon’s monumental *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.¹⁹ The borders of “the East” thus corresponded, from one point of view, to those of the ancient Roman Empire in the Orient. Equally, for the British historical imagination of the late nineteenth century, the Orient referred even further into the classical past, evoking the empire of Darius the Great, which was centred around Persia and had

threatened what was recognized as one of the origins of European civilization, Greece. Biblical narratives were another key point of reference. For British travellers in the nineteenth century, a journey in the Orient or in the East often traced a route to Jerusalem, and this might be combined with visits to a series of other famed historical centres, including Cairo, cities in the Levant such as Aleppo and Damascus, and Persian cities such as Shiraz and Isfahan, as well as Baghdad and Constantinople. India, however, was not part of this paradigmatic map, tending to be considered as a separate destination in its own right.²⁰

The East and the Orient were thus associated with a kaleidoscope of different images, reflecting multiple and much-mythologized pasts, making these terms a kind of palimpsest of memory and culture. They variously evoked the cradle of civilization, the Holy Land, and the fulcrum of prosperous empires described by ancient historians and geographers such as Ptolemy, Pliny, and Strabo. Nor was this all: in the British imagination, these representational strata were overlaid by still others, with the Orient or the East also evoking the Bedouin civilization of the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula where Islam was born.²¹ Partly as a result of this evocative power, the terms “East” and “Orient” continued in the early twentieth century to dominate in the press, in literature, and in political and diplomatic circles.

In 1902 the British archaeologist David Hogarth published *The Nearer East*, thereby popularizing another new term – and yet another rival to “Middle East” for terminological prominence.²² The “Nearer East” was specified as being an expanse of territories extending from the Adriatic Sea to the Black and Caspian Seas and even to the Indian Ocean. This label enjoyed a brief vogue in the early twentieth century, probably initially because of the events that shook the Balkans between 1900 and 1914, but perhaps also because, given its geographical definition, it provided a way of reformulating the Eastern Question.²³

Between 1914 and 1918, Mesopotamia and the wider Ottoman Empire were major theatres of the war, yet the term “Middle East” was only rarely invoked in Britain. Only in the 1920s did this twenty-year-old term gain official status.²⁴ Most auspiciously, in 1921 a new Middle East Department was established within the Colonial Office at the instigation of its then secretary of state, Winston Churchill. This Middle East Department was charged with administering Palestine, Aden,

Iraq, and Transjordan. This was different from Chirol's Middle East in that it did not include the Gulf, Persia, Egypt, or Afghanistan. But like Chirol's, Churchill's Middle East reached the shores of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. There is another significant testimony to the relevance of the "Middle East" concept around the same period: in 1920 the Royal Geographical Society's Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, a quasi-official body charged with standardizing geographical nomenclature for use by British institutions, set out a new position on the question. It vouchsafed that from then on, with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the term "Near East" would refer only to the Balkans; "Middle East" would refer to the regions between the Bosphorus and India.²⁵ In 1922 an influential historian, Arnold Toynbee, adopted the terminology espoused by the RGS, thereby giving it a degree of scholarly legitimation. The Greeks, the Romans, and the Bulgars were, in his view, "Near Eastern nations"; the adjective "Middle Eastern" should, however, be used in reference to Arabs, Turks, and Persians.²⁶ It may be said, then, that by the interwar period, "Middle East" was gaining discursive ground in Britain. But it was not until the Second World War, with the creation of the British Middle East Command based in Cairo, or perhaps even as late as the Cold War, that the terminological ascendancy of "Middle East" in Britain was completed.²⁷

What should we conclude from this genealogy of concepts forged from the end of the nineteenth century onward to designate this intermediate but indeterminate space located between the Occident and the Far East? What can be deduced from the existence of so many competing and fluid names, all of them trying to encapsulate a geographical grey area?

From one point of view, the Middle East may be understood as emphatically an invention of "the West," that is, an Orient set in binary terms against an Occident. This Middle East, seen as a cultural and intellectual construction and the site of an absolute alterity, has been influentially explored in the work of Edward Said.²⁸ Seen in these terms, the Middle East appears conceivable only in relation to the West and a geography centred on Europe. Its genesis in cartographic form beginning in 1908 and the remaking of its borders during and after the First World War are to be understood as projections of Western

imperialism and, more specifically, of competition over access to oil resources, exemplified in the division of the spoils of victory in 1918 between France, Britain, and the United States. In this light the notion of the Middle East amounts, as one scholar of the region's historical geography has noted, to a "capricious colonial artifact" reflecting "the geopolitical and economic interests of the European powers who created it."²⁹ As summarized by the historian Roderic H. Davison, "the power and parochial outlook of the western nations are responsible" for the birth of this space. And one Western power had particular responsibility: Britain, "the villain in the piece."³⁰

From this point of view, the First World War and the interwar period saw the effective inception of the Middle East, principally orchestrated by Britain, which had become the dominant power there.³¹ The Middle East was erected on the territorial ruins of the Ottoman Empire, which was dismantled after 1919. At the postwar peace conferences at Versailles, San Remo, and Sèvres, heads of state drew borders in the sands of the former Ottoman provinces, assigning mandates and oil deposits mainly to Britain and, to a lesser extent, France. In 1928 a round of oil business negotiations, known as the Red Line Agreement, continued this dynamic. Between 1918 and the 1930s, a new Middle East was thus emerging, organized around the geographies of mandates and of oil, rooted in the deserts of Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and Palestine and forged by British diplomacy, notably as steered in the early twentieth century by figures such as Arthur Balfour, Winston Churchill, George Curzon, George Sykes, and David Lloyd George.³² From these starting points, an extensive scholarship has been dedicated to the transformations wrought in the Middle East and in wider global geopolitics by the "oil revolution" over the past century.

Yet at the same time, as scholars have noted, "the genesis of the term" Middle East has received significantly less scrutiny.³³ In focusing on the twentieth century, historians have largely overlooked how the region had fulfilled a different function – and a specific imaginary – within the British Empire during the nineteenth century, and that both were different from what followed in the wake of the First World War. This, then, is the basis of the present book. It is of course possible to overstate the importance of a watershed moment around 1900 in the history of the region now termed the "Middle East": in the sweep of

nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, the region saw many continuities as well as changes in the interventionist policies of Britain and other imperial powers. Yet it remains the case that “Middle East” was coined *before* oil was discovered in industrial-scale and commercially viable quantities in the region (beginning in southwestern Persia in 1908). In investigating the nineteenth-century British Middle East, this book takes seriously the first definitions created by Chirol and Gordon, for whom the Middle East was organized around the maritime world of the Gulf and around the purpose of providing a defensive buffer zone for India. Hence this book’s title, which highlights the direct links between British imperialism in the Gulf and the creation of the Middle East. The Middle East was invented by British imperialists and had two goals. One was to protect and defend India from potential invasion; the other was to link not only different parts of the British Empire but also three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa; and three bodies of water: the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, and the Red Sea.

More specifically, this book contends that we should not look solely to the West and specifically to London to understand the creation of the Middle East. On the contrary, we also need to look east, to the British Empire in India in the nineteenth century. *Inventing the Middle East* thus proposes to recast the history of the Middle East by reversing the historical and the geographical perspectives so often adopted in the past. That is the essence of the present work’s originality. This is not, however, to claim that the invention of the Middle East was rooted solely in South and West Asia. To do so would be to replace one kind of determinism with another. Accordingly, while this account seeks to avoid an excessively Eurocentric vision of the phenomenon of British expansionism in West Asia, it does not seek flatly to replace this with a blunt claim for the overriding salience of a “peripheral view” rooted in India.³⁴ The relevant history is more complex and more nuanced.

As its central argument, *Inventing the Middle East* contends that a key phase of the history of the conceptualization of the Middle East occurred during the long nineteenth century, in British India and in the Persian Gulf, and in constant dialogue with the various imperial institutions in London. Starting in the early nineteenth century, various figures in India’s two key administrative capitals, Bombay and Calcutta, as well as in the Gulf and London, began to flesh out a range of

practices and ideas regarding this space between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, in the “middle” of Britain’s eastern possessions, which would ultimately make it possible to evoke a “Middle East.” The Middle East was thus a co-production of the policies of, on the one hand, the Indian presidencies from the early nineteenth century and the Government of India after 1858 and, on the other hand, the imperial administrations based in London.

*The History of the Middle East Seen through
the Prism of India’s History*

Inventing the Middle East takes up the call made by Christopher Bayly for “reintegrating ‘west Asia’ with the history of the Indian ‘sub-continent,’” while also taking into account the role of the government in London.³⁵ By analyzing the complexities of British imperialism in the Persian Gulf and its coastal regions, with particular reference to the role of India, this book allows us to untangle the history of the invention of the concept of the Middle East. What was the nature of British colonial power on the Indian subcontinent, and to what extent was that colonial power a force in its own right in its own macroregion rather than simply a tool of the government in London?

At the outset of the time frame studied in this book, the British had been a presence in India for two centuries already. The East India Company, a monopoly trading firm based in London, had been established in 1600; its initial tangible form in India had come in the shape of trading outposts on the Coromandel Coast, a privilege granted by the Mughal emperors who then dominated part of the subcontinent. By the mid-eighteenth century, a densification of its network of outposts on the subcontinent and an intensification of its interests there saw the Company transformed into a political actor. This involved an expanding territorial presence, profiting from Mughal decline: the Company achieved dominance first in Bengal; then in the centre of India, through a series of wars with the Sultanate of Mysore ending in 1799; and then through a series of further conflicts with Maratha and Sikh antagonists in the north. Many other territories were co-opted into the Company’s sphere of influence as a consequence of treaties with local powers. The Company’s footing in India was administered

via three “presidencies,” each headed by a governor, located at Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta, with the latter gradually gaining an ascendant position in the Company’s governing structure over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Below the presidencies were a descending series of other Company trading and administrative outposts (notably “residencies” and “agencies”). The colonies of the East India Company on the subcontinent thus played a major role in the foundation of what is sometimes referred to as a “second” British Empire, firmly rooted in South Asia, created in the aftermath of the loss of the North American colonies.³⁶

After the Indian Rebellion of 1857, a sweeping reform of the governing structure on the subcontinent was undertaken. The Company was abolished and replaced with a new structure through the Government of India Act (1858). In London the key figure would thereafter be a government minister, the Secretary of State for India, while on the subcontinent the colonial administration would be directed by a governor general (or viceroy). Lands previously governed by the Company passed to the British Crown and were ruled directly; however, large swathes of the subcontinent remained governed only indirectly, after the signing of accords with the local princely rulers.

Be it under the East India Company or through the Government of India, the influence of this British colonial presence on the subcontinent also played out in territories farther afield. From its earliest days, the Company had developed a network of trading outposts across the Indian Ocean, from the African coast to Southeast Asia.³⁷ Notably, it established a presence in Penang in 1786, in Singapore in 1819, and in Malacca in 1824. These far-flung sites were administered by the various presidencies on the subcontinent. In the Gulf, an epicontinental sea in the Indian Ocean world, operations would be conducted largely under the auspices of the Bombay Presidency. From small beginnings in the seventeenth century, the Company went on to develop “factories” (or trading posts) across a series of sites in the Gulf, essentially in Persia and along the Persian coast, at Shiraz, Isfahan, Jask, and Bandar Abbas. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were two residencies in the Gulf, one at Bushire in Persia and the other at Basra in Ottoman territory. With the growing politicization of the East India Company, the Bushire Residency would become of paramount importance for the

British presence in the Gulf. The Bushire Residency in turn administered various other outposts, notably an agency in Muscat, and worked in close cooperation with the various British diplomatic envoys sent to the Persian court.

The policies toward the Persian Gulf of the administrations in India – the presidencies up until 1858, the Government of India thereafter – are at the heart of the analysis here. The chapters that follow reconstruct the chronology and methods of British India's imperial interventions in the Gulf from the late eighteenth century to the eve of the First World War. This history has not previously been the subject of a full study.³⁸ Indeed, the Gulf has long been something of a poor relation in the historiography of the territories and border zones that were part of the orbit of British India; other spaces, such as Burma, Ceylon, and Southeast Asia, have been studied in detail.³⁹

Inventing the Middle East contends that however little scholarly attention has been paid to it, the Gulf was in fact hugely important for British India. Seen at first, at the end of the eighteenth century, as a peripheral region subject to the depredations of pirates, the Gulf would become transformed in the coming decades into India's sand-and-water border, one with a vital protective function. This book shows that the existence of a perennial threat to India – first incarnated by the French and the Wahhabis and Gulf-based “pirates” in the decades around 1800, then by the Russians from 1820 to 1830, and ultimately by the Germans between 1870 and 1880 – allowed Britain to justify a long century of imperial interventionism in the Gulf.⁴⁰ The Gulf was turned into a protective buffer zone over the course of the nineteenth century by an ensemble of political practices that are detailed in this book: these included treaties signed with local powers, maritime patrols, a strengthening of the role of the Indian government's representatives in the region, the undertaking of surveys and mapping ventures, and the fostering of a political economy in the Gulf linked to two booming global commodities, pearls and dates.

From the 1790s to the middle of the nineteenth century, the East India Company's efforts focused first on the south of the Gulf, on the region around the Strait of Hormuz, between the northern part of the Sultanate of Oman and the southern part of Bahrain, which would later be known to the British as the “Lower Gulf.” This sphere of influence

then expanded, so that by 1900 it extended from Muscat to the Shatt al-‘Arab and encompassed both the Persian and Arabian shores of the Gulf. From 1880 to 1899, when Britain and Kuwait signed a treaty, relations with the micropowers in the southern Gulf and Oman were strengthened, while part of the upper Gulf was absorbed into the Government of India’s sphere of dominance. In 1914 the Gulf was the most important part of the network of directly and indirectly ruled territories that formed British India’s sphere of influence in the western Indian Ocean, which also extended to Aden, Oman, and Zanzibar, as well as to Hadramaut, the African coast, and the shores of the Red Sea.⁴¹ Comparative attention to other spaces on the edge of Britain’s Indian empire demonstrates that the Gulf was a terraqueous border zone: both a link and a gap, both peripheral and central, and capable of connecting several worlds.⁴²

Ultimately, then, by analyzing the example of the Gulf, *Inventing the Middle East* demonstrates that a British sub-imperialism existed in western Asia, initiated in part from the imperial centre of India. This perspective draws on a body of scholarship that has highlighted the existence of an element of autonomy in the government of the British colonies on the Indian subcontinent, dating back to the middle of the eighteenth century. Especially after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, British interests on the subcontinent gained ascendancy over those of France and the colonies of the East India Company engaged in an intense maritime expansion policy in the Indian Ocean world.⁴³ This more or less continuous expansion would be carried out by the presidencies and then the Government of India throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

A History of the Space

As with “Middle East” and “British India,” the term “Gulf,” or “Gulf region,” is not without problems. To what exactly does this geographic term refer? A clarification is necessary. The terms Gulf, Persian Gulf, Arabian-Persian Gulf, and Arabo-Persian Gulf in the following pages are used interchangeably. They are here used to evoke the subject of this study – that is to say, the British Gulf and its different boundaries as conceived of in the nineteenth century by the British. They designate a zone with fluctuating borders, centred around a maritime world

where London's and India's imperial policies were rolled out: the space evoked here is not the geographically more precise "Gulf" understood as an epicontinental sea within the Indian Ocean. Space, as imagined and as constructed historically, is the basis of study here.⁴⁵

The British Gulf was constructed around a shallow, warm-water maritime expanse surrounded by rocky and sandy coasts, scattered with islands and shallows, and connected to the Indian Ocean world by the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman. In the late eighteenth century this space was characterized by extreme political fragmentation. By this point, the Persian and Ottoman empires exercised only limited authority in these waters and along these shores. The Sultanate of Oman and Zanzibar, the Qasimi from Ras al-Khaimah, and the local micropowers arrayed along the Gulf's Arabian coast – Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai – were engaged in power struggles and rivalries. This was the fragmented space that the British attempted, in an accretive process, to unify under their imperial purview. This "British" Gulf was, then, a composite space, encompassing both the Persian and Arabian littorals and the northern coasts of Oman, but also islands such as Hormuz and inland waterways connecting the Gulf to interior regions. In particular the Gulf's influence could be felt far inland through the delta of the Shatt al-ʿArab, a river system formed by the juncture of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers and joined farther along its course by the Karun River.

Reconstructing this British Gulf makes it possible to consider this space not as a backwater of nineteenth-century history but as a region that was a key crucible of larger global and imperial conjunctures. In particular this study of the Gulf highlights two global processes that reached far beyond the edges of the Shatt al-ʿArab and the Strait of Hormuz: the emergence of a global economic market, and the "conquest" of vast swathes of the globe by European imperial powers. While this was an "age of global imperialism," the present account also highlights that in the case of the British Gulf, the guiding dynamics were not simply metropolitan, that is to say centred on London, but also involved a sub-imperialism directed from the Indian subcontinent itself. Accordingly, this book seeks to enable comparisons and connections with other spaces – governed both formally and informally – of the British Empire as a whole, as well as with the distinctive arc

of influence and interventionism that emanated around the terrestrial and maritime edges of British India.

Even after the Suez Canal was opened in the late nineteenth century, the Gulf retained a special place in the British imperial system. It kept its strategic importance as a flank on which the Indian subcontinent might become vulnerable, and it continued to offer a parallel travel route to India. It also remained a potent site of imperial fantasy. The world of the Gulf was a horizon of different histories and possible futures, reaching to the Shatt al-‘Arab region and Mesopotamia, centres of prosperous ancient empires such as the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, which had been envied throughout the period of antiquity for their fertility and wealth. These histories, which were being excavated by British scholars – and appropriated in the name of metropolitan science – at precisely this period, gave the region a vivid and enduring place in imperial imaginaries. The British dreamed that by establishing themselves in this vast region, they would become successors to Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Alexander. All the while, they hoped to create their own empire, a perduring empire that, unlike the ones that preceded it, might never disappear.

The British Gulf was part of a layered spatial invention, one that was seen through the prism of India’s perceived vulnerability, and one around which in turn the Middle East would come to be envisaged. The various aspects of this study tap into a range of different sources, historiographies, and methodologies.⁴⁶ This involves interlinking the approaches scholars have taken to studying the history of empire with those developed for investigating maritime spaces from a global perspective. In particular, viewing the Gulf through the lens of its being India’s maritime border provides a powerful point of reference in relation to the historiographical renewal that has been happening in recent decades in the field of the history of the Indian Ocean world. The “oceanic turn,” of which such histories are an example, presents a valuable way forward for rethinking the history of the Middle East.⁴⁷ More specifically, this book relates to recent critical scholarship that has proposed thinking, according to the formulation proposed by Nile Green, in terms of a vast “Indian Ocean arena” defined by “social geographies” and “mobile societies” and transcending the frontiers of multiple conventional areas of analysis (notably South Asia, Central

Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Middle East).⁴⁸ This “arena” was one that transcended Eurocentric and imperial geographies and one in which the Gulf was a key component.

A considerable body of scholarship now exists on the impact of globalization on the societies of the Indian Ocean, a process that was inseparable from European imperialism in this terraqueous space.⁴⁹ These studies reveal the history of the Indian Ocean over many centuries, thus showing how this space offers a vast parallel to the historical canvas of the Mediterranean as explored in the pioneering *longue durée* scholarship of Fernand Braudel.⁵⁰ As early as the medieval period, the Indian Ocean was linked through various flows to other maritime and land spaces near and far; by then, it was already integrated into the world economy and its different markets.⁵¹ Far from being a closed-off space at the time of the arrival of European powers, the Indian Ocean was a connected arena, criss-crossed by the movements of merchants, pilgrims, travellers, sailors, and workers from South Asia, Malaysia, and the Arabian Peninsula.⁵² The consequences of imperialism and the arrival of steamships in this maritime space over the course of the nineteenth century – which resulted in the destruction of some of the Indian Ocean’s existing economic and human networks, the transformation of others, and the development of new forms of globalization – therefore require nuanced appraisals and form the subject of ongoing inquiry and scholarly debate.⁵³

Study, in this light, of the British Gulf of the nineteenth century is made possible by a great number of historical sources. As noted earlier with regard to the launching in the public sphere of the term “Middle East,” there exists a considerable published record about the British Gulf, dating from the period itself: these records include travel accounts, journalism and pamphlets, memoirs, maps, and other representations such as photographic images. Even more important for this account, however, the period saw the creation of a range of archival records stemming from imperial policy-making and administration. Much of this material was produced by the colonial bureaucracy on the Indian subcontinent, before 1858 with the various presidencies, then after that year by the Government of India.⁵⁴ These in turn can be considered alongside British government records, notably from departments such as the Foreign Office and the Admiralty; key materials

here are the archives of consular posts in Persia (Bushire) and Ottoman Iraq (Baghdad and Basra). Areas of agreement, but also of tension and divergence, between the two governing poles at play here – the authorities in India, and those in the British metropole – can be traced by confronting the records produced by each side. Some critical sidelights are shed on this by reference to the archives of French consular posts in the Gulf region (Oman and Baghdad). Overall, however, this is a study of the British Gulf rather than an attempt at a complete history of all of the different powers invested in the region, some of whose histories have already been the subject of valuable scholarship, and the picture here is reconstructed largely via British sources. By the same token, this work is by no means a history of the Gulf populations of the nineteenth century; when the voices of the people of the Gulf are heard in the British sources, this is in fragmentary and polemicized ways, requiring reading against the grain rather than at face value.

Inventing the Middle East is thus an aquatic or amphibious history of the Middle East, a space whose maritime character and connections with the Indian Ocean world invite re-evaluation. It seeks to depart from the terracentrism of some studies of the Middle East, which are overly focused on the landward aspects of the Ottoman Empire; it proposes instead a history of this macroregion as centred on a maritime edge, the Gulf.⁵⁵ Paying heed to the Gulf's terraqueous environment here reveals the nineteenth-century emergence of one Middle East, the British Middle East, which was integrated during the nineteenth century into a larger Indian Ocean arena. To be sure, this is but one among a host of other Middle Easts. Yet the history traced here also suggests a broader need to consider the histories of different Middle Easts – before and after the invention of the term itself – as being concerned with a maritime space. The Middle East, though organized around a maritime space, the Gulf, remains too often envisaged, even today, as a terrestrial space rooted in deserts. While opening new horizons, the present study also invites us to escape a landlocked vision of the history of this region.⁵⁶

The opening chapter of this history traces the rivalries between several powers – the French, the British, the Wahhabis (who were expanding significantly in the Arabian Peninsula at this juncture), the Qasimi of

Ras al-Khaimah and their allies along the Persian and Arabian shores, and the Sultanate of Oman – in the waters of the Gulf between 1780 and 1820. It sets the beginning of British intervention in the Gulf in local, regional, and global contexts and analyzes the discourse about “pirates” that developed in British India from the end of the eighteenth century. It contends that accusations of piracy against the Gulf tribes, particularly the Qasimi, were largely a pretext for the Bombay and Calcutta Presidencies to launch their first attack, in 1809, against Ras al-Khaimah, the “pirate” city that commanded the maritime entrance to the Gulf at the Strait of Hormuz. Behind such pretexts lay the larger fear of a French threat to India, felt especially in the aftermath of Napoleon Bonaparte’s 1798 expedition to Egypt. The Gulf was thus beginning to be perceived as a frontier space that, if secured and “pacified,” would protect India’s western flank. This chapter highlights how the spectre of a French threat developed in British India when Napoleon Bonaparte created a menacing network of local and global alliances with the sultan of Oman, the shah of Persia, and the tsar of Russia. Discourses about piracy and pacification, it is argued here, may be best understood as merely the foam on the waves caused by Bonaparte’s half-real, half-fantastical ambitions in West and South Asia and by the East India Company’s own expansive agenda on the subcontinent and in the wider arena formed by the Indian Ocean world.

The second chapter examines the debates about how to manage the Gulf that were conducted in British India in the years after the attack against Ras al-Khaimah. British imperialism in the Gulf region was marked by significant hesitation on the part of the Bombay and Calcutta Presidencies. How extensive a continuing role should they play in the Gulf region? Should British involvement in the Gulf revert to an economic presence only, as had previously obtained? In this view, notably articulated by influential colonial figures in Bombay, to be dragged into an ongoing confrontation with the tyranny represented by Oriental potentates – which in British discourse included Napoleon – would be to fall into a trap. According to the opposing view, an ongoing policy of political interventionism and semiformal empire in the Gulf appeared to be the best tack to follow for protecting British interests in India. As uncertainty continued regarding which strategy to pursue, an important testing of the waters occurred when an envoy,

Captain George Sadleir, was sent from Bombay in 18᠑ to strengthen relations with regional powers: Sadleir would cross the Arabian Peninsula by land – traversing what was new terrain for the British – to meet Ibrahim, son of Mehmed Ali Pasha, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt. Ultimately, in the light of a continued sense of threat to India, embodied by the French up till 18᠖ and by Russia thereafter, a policy of interventionism was chosen. This provided the backdrop to a second attack on Ras al-Khaimah in 18᠑. It also informed the gradual politicization of the East India Company's administration in the Gulf, notably the increasing power of the resident officials it maintained there. Forging this new, more interventionist policy in the Gulf was among the larger shifts in the policy of the Bombay and Calcutta Presidencies, especially under the leadership of Mountstuart Elphinstone and the Marquess of Hastings. This particular shift involved a step change in the expansion of British colonies on the subcontinent, as well as a particular focus on securing India's borderlands. The chapter also analyzes the maritime truce system, which was a decisive element in the process of constructing the Gulf as India's sand-and-water border.

Chapter 3 tracks another dimension of the creation of a borderland for British India in the Gulf by examining how the space was made the object of multiple geographical expeditions, maritime survey programs, and varieties of mapmaking over the course of the nineteenth century. This constituted the geographical invention of a British Gulf, a phenomenon that should also be understood as the creation of a border zone for India. These efforts were structured around a maritime space encompassing both the Persian and Arabian shores of the Gulf, one that stretched laterally from east to west, from the Sultanate of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz to the Shatt al-ʿArab. This chapter describes how surveyors, engineers, topographers, and sailors sent out from India created an imperial topography, naming and standardizing space. It also underscores the importance of interactions with the local Gulf populations and highlights the question of how greatly this ambitious imperial geographical project may have relied on pre-existing local topographical knowledge.

Chapter 4 examines how the nineteenth-century Gulf became integrated into the expanding world economy, especially through the globalization of trade in two regional products, pearls and dates. With

both pearls and dates becoming the objects of a market boom among European and American consumers, this had a powerful impact on the Gulf's economy. This chapter argues that the consolidation over this same period, under the auspices of British India, of practices of political oversight and interventionism in the Gulf – an example of a wider phenomenon that historians have labelled “informal” empire – created a context that was favourable to the development of the date and pearl booms. In British imperial ideology, fostering legal trade centred around these two global commodities was envisaged as key to ending piracy and other forms of regional conflict, with the resulting prosperity serving to establish peace in the Gulf waters. By the same token, it would also offer a tangible endorsement of the virtues of imperial tutelage (or “Pax Britannica,” as it was beginning to be characterized around this time). Ideology aside, the instrumental value of establishing a political economy built around globalized trade in dates and pearls may be underscored, for this was an integral element of the larger process of transforming the Gulf's status as a dangerous peripheral area menacing British India: the larger payoff of prosperity in the Gulf would be the safeguarding of India's western flank. This chapter also explores how the globalization of dates and pearls was deeply invested in slave trade networks in the western Indian Ocean world. The two booms were powered by an increase in slave labour in pearl fishing and date cultivation. Efforts on the part of the authorities in India to curb the slave trade in this macroregion, it is argued here, remained limited precisely because this trade was crucial to the functioning of these two economic sectors and so to maintaining the British system in the Gulf. Conversely, a final trade in the Gulf around the turn of the twentieth century, namely that in arms, often transported via smuggling networks, highlights how not all patterns of exchange in the region proved amenable to British interests, in that the final destinations of such military equipment included frontier zones of conflict with British India.

Chapter 5 moves the focus of analysis northward in the Gulf world to consider a beguiling sphere in its hinterlands, Mesopotamia (to apply the historicizing term used for this area by the British in the nineteenth century). Beginning in the 1830s, the archaeological excavations of Austen Layard and Claudius Rich unearthed historical traces

of ancient Mesopotamia, providing new materials for mythologized visions of the past as well as spurring fantasies of contemporary reconstruction. While new steam navigation routes linking London and the Indian subcontinent via the Gulf were becoming the objects of experiment and debate, the transformations associated with bringing steam technology into the Shatt al-ʿArab delta and its related river system were being seen as a powerful projection of imperial achievement and a reordering of the natural world. This held out the symbolically saturated promise of thereby breathing new life into ancient Mesopotamia, thus restoring a neglected realm of collapsed ancient empires under the banner of British imperial modernity. This would see modern technology forge a new economic empire in the north of the Gulf, making a hub that could bring together and multiply the wealth of Syria, Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, and India. Archaeology, the opening up of steam lines in the Shatt al-ʿArab, and the development of the British residency in Baghdad were some of the key manifestations of this developing informal imperialism in Mesopotamia. Ultimately, this chapter argues, this Mesopotamian moment in the Gulf furnished a kind of first instantiation of concepts that would later be bundled under the category of “Middle East,” namely, a space conceived of as linking together multiple continents, seas, and oceans, on whose fortunes hung the safety of the western approaches to India.

The book concludes with an analysis of the final phase of British imperialism in the Gulf, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a period of renewed imperial ambition and international tensions – conventionally labelled as the “New Imperialism” – the British faced heightened competition in the Gulf. These dynamics included a renewal of French efforts to position themselves in Oman and in the northern Indian Ocean, a more assertive role played by the Ottoman authorities in the north of the Gulf, and new efforts by Russia and Germany to insert themselves into this space. Conflict tended to be restricted to disputes over commerce and economic interests, but for all the competing actors in the Gulf and its hinterlands, including the British, these masked larger strategic and national competitions. The Government of India and the political bodies in London in charge of imperial policies sometimes disagreed about which strategies to adopt in response to these competing threats. Ultimately, however, the result

was a far more assertive policy in the Gulf, tending toward further formalizing and territorializing a presence that had previously been more loosely asserted but that had also been under less pressure from other actors. Mainly under the auspices of the Government of India, a series of treaties were signed with Oman and the tribal chiefs along the Trucial Coast, instituting what were disguised protectorates; in parallel with this, Bahrain and Kuwait were effectively absorbed into the jurisdiction of British India. A major architect of this policy step change toward greater implantation and securitization of what was becoming as much a formal as an informal empire in the Gulf was George Curzon, the Viceroy of India, who identified the region as key to the protection of British India. While this backdrop of heightened tensions and renewed interventionism marked continuity as much as change in the triangle linking together Britain, the Indian subcontinent, and the Gulf, dating over the previous century, it would be at this juncture that a new geopolitical terminology, the “Middle East,” would be coined. This term would acquire lasting influence in the twentieth century and beyond, albeit in ways that often transformed – and in doing so lost sight of – its original referent.